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DEPT FOR EUR/WE (TCUNNINGHAM); DRL/IRF (JMORALES)

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [VT](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: ANTI-CONVERSION LEGISLATION CONCERNS VATICAN; JESUIT HAS  
ROSIER VIEW

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Political Officer, POL, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary  
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1. (C) Vatican Country Director for Sri Lanka Monsignor Bernardito Auza told us recently that the Vatican was concerned about pending anti-conversion legislation in that country. He emphasized the "dangerous" effect such legislation could have on schools, orphanages, old age homes, hospitals, and other institutions that the Church runs. Auza said the Holy See was concerned about any abridgement of religious liberty for followers of any faith. Auza's perspective contrasted with that of the Rome-based Jesuit regional secretary for South Asia, Fr. Anton Weerasinghe. Weerasinghe told us some Sri Lankan Catholics did not oppose the legislation, as they saw it as a defense against evangelicals making inroads into their traditional communities. He had an optimistic outlook on inter-religious relations in the country, and claimed they had remained relatively stable in the seven months since the Tsunami. While not minimizing the seriousness of any

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inter-religious violence, he commented that anti-Christian attacks tended to be against fringe groups, and not Catholics. He claimed that violence by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) affected all denominations. End Summary.

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Vatican Concerned about Anti-conversion Legislation  
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2. (C) Holy See Country Director for Sri Lanka Monsignor Bernardito Auza told us in early August that the Vatican was "certainly concerned" about Sri Lankan anti-conversion legislation, noting he had two reports on his desk on the subject from the papal nuncio to Sri Lanka. Auza said there had been close communication between the Holy See and the Sri Lankan Church on the issue, and also highlighted a July 29 statement by the Archbishop of Colombo, Oswald Gomis, who appealed to the Sri Lankan government and parliament to respect the "fundamental right to religious freedom." Auza felt that the current version of the anti-conversion bill was even harsher than an earlier version he had seen.

3. (C) According to Auza, the Vatican is concerned that Church-run schools, orphanages, old age homes, hospitals, and other institutions could become targets of this law as some might charge that such establishments were proselytizing. Auza said that children, the elderly and the sick had special protections under the law, and since these were some of the main constituencies of the Church in its aid work, the legislation could create a "dangerous" situation. Auza believed that penalties stemming from the legislation could affect not only the institutions noted above, but also individual dioceses and the Sri Lankan Church as a whole. Auza was quick to emphasize that the Holy See's concerns on the legislation were not simply related to its parochial concerns; "We are concerned any time the religious freedom of any group is under attack," he said.

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Jesuit: Anti-conversion Bill Supported by Some Catholics  
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4. (C) Auza's perspective contrasted with that of the regional secretary for South Asia at the curia of the Society of Jesus

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(Jesuits) in Rome, Fr. Anton Weerasinghe. Weerasinghe insisted that some Sri Lankan Catholics supported the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party's anti-conversion legislation. "We are not insecure about this law; it might support Catholic interests in some ways," he said. Weerasinghe argued that the anti-conversion legislation would affect the activities of evangelical and other small Christian groups rather than major religious groups. He claimed that proselytism by evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses primarily targeted Catholics and Lutherans, not Buddhists or Muslims. "We don't want people to be cheated by fringe religious groups," Weerasinghe said. He said that a common technique of evangelical groups was to invite

people to "Sunday masses" that weren't actually Catholic. Weerasinghe expected the parliament to pass the legislation this year, and concluded that local implementation and the interpretation of judges would determine the real effect of the law.

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Tsunami Relief not Leading to Communal Tensions

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15. (C) Weerasinghe had an optimistic outlook on broader issues of inter-religious relations in Sri Lanka, and described a relatively stable period in the country in the seven months since the Tsunami. He commended the work of international NGOs

in the aftermath of the disaster, and noted that after receiving word of the Tsunami, Jesuit Father General Kolvenbach immediately donated a symbolic \$10,000 and mobilized the Jesuit Refugee Service for aid efforts. He said that despite predictions to the contrary, Christian NGOs' relief work had not led to an expected spike in sectarian tensions. Weerasinghe admitted that there were still occasional attacks. (In fact, shortly after our conversation Rome-based media reported the July 22 burning of a Catholic church in the diocese of Anuradhapura.) Though not minimizing the seriousness of all inter-religious violence, he commented that anti-Christian attacks in Sri Lanka did not usually target Catholics or Lutherans, but were against "fringe" Christian communities such as evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses.

16. (C) Weerasinghe said there had been some proselytism in the wake of the Tsunami, with one or two Christian NGOs including religious literature in their food aid packages. He condemned this behavior as "taking advantage of the population." Weerasinghe said that Christian NGOs were not the only ones to exploit the situation, as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party co-opted the Tsunami relief work to gain free publicity. According to Weerasinghe, when the first NGOs responded, the JVP draped foreign aid trucks with party banners and signs. He said the local populations initially believed the JVP was entirely responsible for the quick response.

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LTTE: A Threat to Everyone  
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17. (C) The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) are indiscriminate and do not target Catholics any more than they do other groups, emphasized Weerasinghe [please protect his comments on LTTE]. Unlike the majority of Protestants who are ethnically Tamil, Catholics are evenly divided between Tamils and Sinhalese, he said. Weerasinghe recounted how at the beginning of the conflict many Tamil nuns and priests had supported the LTTE, and the bishop of Trincomalee-Batticaloa had been known to refer to the guerillas as "my boys." However he said that after the LTTE "requisitioned" the bishop's jeep and shot the vicar general, Catholic opinion turned against the group. "They have no values, no morality -- just the power of the gun," Weerasinghe declared. He cited the 1990 disappearance and presumed murder of Fr. Eugene Herbert, an AmCit working at a Jesuit technical school, as an example of LTTE violence. He strongly supported the efforts of foreign aid agencies to have aid distributed by need, especially in LTTE held areas, but also raised concerns. "When you give money to criminals, who is going to do the accounting?" he asked. Weerasinghe admitted he was strongly anti-LTTE, and that Tamil priests might hold other views.

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Kumaratunga: a Friend to Catholics?  
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18. (C) Weerasinghe's optimism about the inter-religious situation in his home country was striking. He believes that President Kumaratunga is a friend to the Catholic Church. "Although she is politically Buddhist, President Kumaratunga has been good to Catholics and she depends on Catholic leadership and support," he insisted. Auza also felt that Kumaratunga has been attentive to Catholics; he said the Sri Lankan bishops had had a good meeting with her in January, and reported that in private she seemed sympathetic to the Church. According to Auza, however, she is "cornered" by political considerations and will ultimately do little to address Catholic concerns.

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Comment  
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19. (C) From our vantage point, Weerasinghe seems to be isolated in his opinion of Sri Lanka's anti-conversion legislation. Though we defer to Embassy Colombo on the specifics of the Sri Lankan bishops' position, we note that during their May "ad Limina" (official quinquennial) visit to Rome, Joseph Vianney

Fernando, bishop of Kandy and conference president, raised the bishops' concerns about the legislation with Pope Benedict XVI. Auza noted that the Vatican approved the bishops' conference's backing of the creation of a national inter-religious commission that could address the issue of the legislation and related topics. The Holy See has also discussed the anti-conversion legislation with Sri Lankan Ambassador to the Holy See Fernando both in Rome and in Geneva where she is resident.

10. (C) The Vatican Foreign Ministry is unlikely to be influenced by Weerasinghe on an issue such as this. Lines of communication are normally fairly set between the MFA, the nuncio, and the bishops' conference and do not often include the

leadership of religious orders. Still, Weerasinghe wields some influence within the Jesuit curia as the Jesuit Father General's primary advisor on Sri Lanka. He told us that there are 120 Jesuits in the Sri Lanka province of the Society of Jesus, and three technical schools. We would be interested in hearing Embassy Colombo's views on the extent of Jesuit influence in the country. End Comment.

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